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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the development of an Academic and Support Group Model in a large Southwestern school district. The program was implemented in order to profile at-risk adolescents by combining teacher inservice training and curriculum development. Based on certain acceptance criteria, 50 students from each of the district's five senior high schools were selected for participation in this project. Surveys were administered to determine student perceptions and self-reports of school problems and needs, parental relationships and support, and personal views. Results indicate that at-risk student needs and problems would make positive school performance difficult. Ordinary school intervention, such as tutoring and counseling, cannot adequately address these problems. The project also provided data showing parental cooperation is necessary if any at-risk program is to be effective. (13 references) (SI)

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An Analysis of An Academic and Support Group Program for At-Risk Secondary Schools

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Introduction

One of the major concerns for educators across the United States during the past decade have been ways in which to increase graduation rates and retain potential dropouts, or at-risk students, in secondary schools. While a variety of public and private resources have been available in this struggle, a model that would identify at-risk youngsters, develop the academic and personal skills necessary for them to succeed in school, and be accepted by a broad based educational constituency has not been developed. While there are a number of reasons for a lack of consensus in treating at-risk students, one of the major stumbling blocks in this process has been a commonly accepted profile of those at-risk.

Over the past ten years characteristics often shared in common by students experiencing school problems have been identified in studies of at-risk populations. Socio-economic background, family stress or instability, lack of interest from teachers, either real or imagined, in the student's academic or personal progress and a feeling that the disciplinary system is ineffective or unfair have all been noted as factors promoting at-risk situations (Wehlage, Rutter and Turnbaugh, 1987). Schulz, Toles and Rice (1986) also relate that reading levels and chronological age differences are important in enumerating this population base. Other studies indicate that social disabilities such as delinquency, lack of relationships with teachers and peers and rebelliousness, as well as accelerated transitions to adult roles also play a significant role in identifying at-risk cohorts (Pallas, 1984).

Evolving from these studies have been descriptions of at-risk and dropout groups in the form of gross statistics. While these descriptive criteria from school districts and states are readily available, differences in dropout and at-risk definitions as well as the ways in which these statistics are reported have prevented a true national profile on dropouts from being formed. As Rumberger (1987) points out:

> "No one really knows what causes students to dropout of high school. Dropouts themselves report a number of reasons for leaving school with marked differences by social groups."

Rumberger (1987) further states that despite all the known factors that cause dropout and at-risk behavior, a widely accepted causal model does not exist. This is important if we are to uncover the processes that underlie and lead to dropping out. Underscoring this need is the fact that dropping out may be the first step in a total disengagement from a broader range of societal institutions and their concurrent value structures.

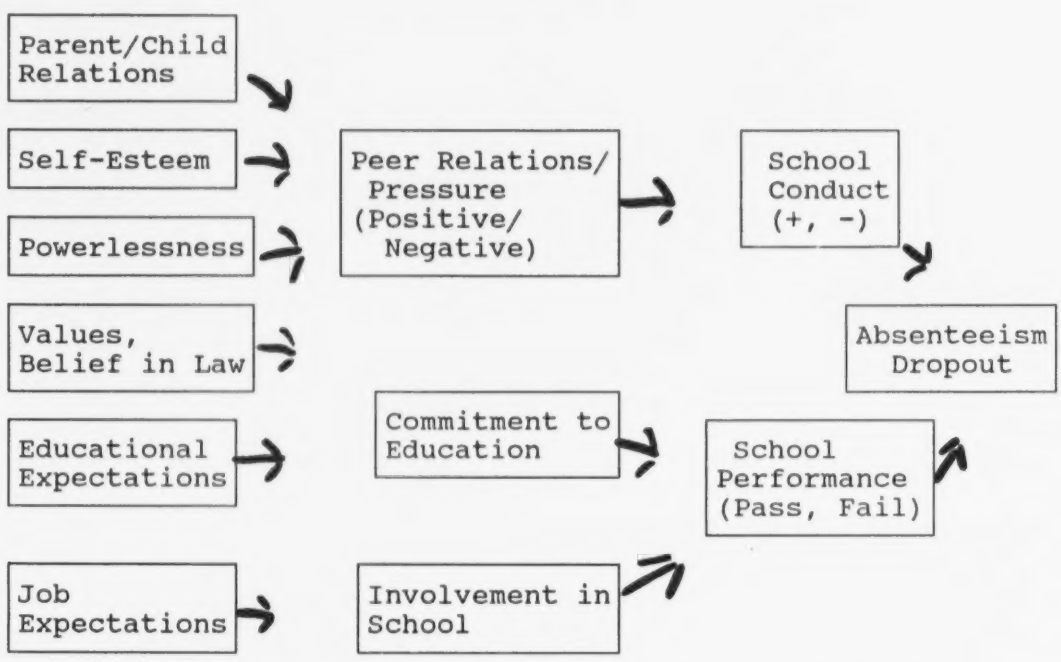
Composite Profile of At-Risk Students

Diagram 1 presents a summary of factors characteristic of the at-risk student. The exact nature of cause-effect relationships are complex, and beyond the scope of this paper, so no attempt is made here to document the causal order of the factors. These should be interpreted rather as "correlates" of at-risk student problems. These problems are characteristic of many at-risk students though not all. For some becoming at-risk may begin at home with poor parental relations. For others, poor

peer relations at school may signal trouble. In some cases, numerous situational factors may precipitate the chain of events that lead to eventually leaving school. The diagram does not attempt to categorize the factors according to whether they are individual, family, or school oriented.

Diagram 1

Composite Profile of the At-Risk Student



In working with those at-risk, the factors illustrated above need to be understood and included as part of any programatic considerations.

Study Design

Reviews of dropout programs and the vast literature on the causes of dropping out suggest that many of those leaving school beyond having identifiable academic problems are also in need of a vast array of personal interdictions and school support services (Rumberger, 1987). Individualized instruction, counseling and teachers sensitive and responsive to the needs of students have been singled out as factors that have been successful in working with at-risk students. Two years ago an Academic and Support Group Model was developed in a large Southwestern school district in an attempt to meet these needs. Combining teacher inservice training and curriculum development, one of this project's goals was to profile at-risk adolescents.

Fifty students from each of the districts five senior high schools were selected for participation in this project. Criteria for acceptance was based on state and local guidelines and included those students who:

a. had not been promoted one or more times
b. were two or more years below grade level
c. had failed or were currently failing at least two courses in any one semester and did not expect to graduate within four years of entrance to high school
d. had failed basic literacy skills tests
e. had low self esteem as noted by professional staff
f. were academically two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics

g. had a composite score on a standardized test two or more grade levels below the grade of record

h. were enrolled in a remedial English language arts or mathematical program

i. were an adjudicated delinquent

j. were attending or had previously been placed in an alternative school setting

k. were economically disadvantaged

l. were a drug or alcohol abuser

m. were currently enrolled in a Limited English Proficiency Program (IEP)

n. were nonparticipants in school activities

Students meeting these initial criteria were then screened into selected target groups. These included: those currently failing one or more courses, those who had failed one or more portions of a basic literacy skills test, minority youngsters falling into the first two categories, and students enrolled in LEP programs falling into the first two categories.

Assessing At-Risk Students

Rather than developing an at-risk profile instrument specific to this project, it was decided to use an adapted version of the Wisconsin Youth Survey. Wehlage, Stone and Kliebard (1980) at the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research designed this instrument to measure the social and personal orientations of at-risk students including:

a. locus of control

b. self esteem

c. parental relations

d. peer pressure

e. perception of teachers and school

f. educational expectations and aspirations

g. vocational expectations and aspirations

h. values and commitment to norms

i. commitment to and involvement in school

j. self-reported behavior problems and deviancy

The advantages of using an adapted form of this instrument were that these items had an established record of reliability and validity and previous studies could be used as a basis of comparison of findings.

Data Summary

The survey was administered to the student population at the on-set of the project to determine their perceptions and self-reports of school problems and needs, parental relationships and support, and personal views. The data reported here is based on an analysis of two hundred and forty (240) responses. Note that some missing data resulted in less than 240 and 100% on some variables.

Population Descriptors:

In this sample 12.6% (30) were 18 years of age, 32.4% (77) were 17 years of age, 31.5% (75) were 16 years of age, 12.6% (30) were 15 years of age and 2.5% (6) were 14 years of age. It should be noted that over seventy-six percent of the population sample was sixteen years of age or older.

Grade levels for this group included 97 (40.8%) 9th graders, 68 (28.6%) 10th graders, and 53 (22.3%) 11 graders. Twenty

students did not indicate a grade level.

Fifty one point five percent (51.5) of the study group were boys. Anglo students numbered 33.5% (80), Blacks 7.5% (18) and Hispanic 50.6% (121). Twenty students did not identify their race or ethnicity.

School and Its Demands:

One of the distinguishing characteristics of students who complete high school, regardless of difficulties, is a belief in the value and importance of education. Closely related is the belief in the value of meeting social expectations, conforming to social norms and laws, and meeting responsibilities. The school has long been considered the major social institution, after the family, for socializing young people. Students who are at risk have difficulty in accepting conventional norms, such as valuing the work ethic, moral principles, acceptance and legitimacy of laws and regulations, and the value of stable family relationships. Questions in this area bore out these notions. Thirty-four percent of the students believed that "school is too hard"; 24% said they have "too much homework"; and 43% said they "dislike school." Additionally sixty-two percent of the students had never participated in any extracurricular activities, and 33% had never attended any school activities.

Self-Esteem:

Another important variable in working with at-risk students is self esteem in that it underlies levels of achievement, motivation, commitment and involvement in school. Self-esteem can also relate to the nature of students' peer relationships in

school. Research indicates that at-risk students tend to have low levels of motivation, commitment, and involvement in school. Lack of school achievement is often associated with low self-esteem, which in turn may leave the at-risk student more susceptible to the influence of negative peer pressure.

Many of the students in this project exhibited low self-esteem and perceived "powerlessness", or inability to improve their life status by their responses to the following:

a. I am a failure: 29%

b. I have little to be proud of: 35%

c. I feel useless and worthless: 26%

d. It's useless to try in school: 28%

e. The chances for making it in life are getting worse: 30%

f. It's not worth planning for the future: 23%

Perceived Access to Education and Job Opportunities:

Many at-risk also tend to have low self expectations. Personal and social orientations tend to affect the extent to which one is committed to schooling. This includes how one views themself, significant others, the school and society. Studies of the importance of students' social bonds to teachers and the school, have been found to be essential if one is to be committed and involved in school(Hirsch, 1969).

Relating to this area students were asked to state their educational and job goals, and the likelihood of reaching them.

These responses were:

a. Not likely to reach educational goal: 16%

b. Likely to drop out before completing school: 23%

c. Do not have an equal chance for an education: 10%

d. Not likely to reach job goal: 7%

e. Not likely to have a steady dependable job as an adult: 7%

f. Not likely to advance and succeed in future job: 6%

g. Not likely I will get the kind of job I want: 8%

The were also asked about specific values related to jobs, school and the law. While not necessarily unique to at-risk students, these responses suggest some possible reasons for problems that those at-risk face in gaining educational and vocational skills.

a. It is sometimes necessary to lie on a job application to get the job you want: 31%

b. If you want to get good grades in school, you have to cheat sometimes: 30%

c. You have to be willing to break the rules for laws to get the thing you want: 19%

Behavioral Problems, Parent Support and Peer Pressure:

Wehlage, Rutter and Turnbaugh (1986) suggest that efforts in reducing school failure and at risk student populations should also attempt to reduce truancy, class disruption and resistance to individual teacher's intellectual and interpersonal counseling efforts.

Within this sample students admitted to the following problems and behaviors in school, at home, and in the community:

a. Sent to principal's office for breaking school rules: 80%

b. Skipped school without parents' permission: 60%

c. Given a teacher a fake excuse for being absent: 53%

d. Spent time in detention hall or discipline problems: 73%

e. Been suspended or expelled for discipline problems: 22%

f. Drank alcoholic beverages illegally: 65%

g. Used, possessed or sold marijuana: 39%

As an adjunct to behavioral issues,, the students responded to queries involving negative peer pressure, parental support, and supervision in the following manner.

Negative Peer Pressure:

a. Kids in my group get into trouble a lot: 43%

b. I choose friends who are not afraid to have fun, even if it's breaking the law 40%

Parents' Support & Supervision:

a. Do not have a good, positive relationship with parents: 26%

b. Parents not concerned with choice of friends: 28%

c. Parents do not attend school functions: 69%

d. Parents do not make me finish homework: 62%

e. Parents do not set a curfew on school nights: 26%

Discussion

A review of the data gathered for this project indicates a correlation to the composite profile of the at-risk student. A significant number of the students identified for inclusion in this project are characterized by the factors discussed above as common among these at-risk. Further, they also indicate by their responses that they have needs and problems which would make positive school performance difficult.

Many of these problems can not be adequately addressed by ordinary school interventions such as tutoring and counseling. The profile identifies personal initiative and interest on the part of the students and their parents as necessary for school success. Concurrently there must also be a development of learning skills and a renewed commitment to school and more involvement in education. Hopes for improvement in school performance is likely to increase self-esteem and reduce the sense of powerlessness, while improving students' educational and job expectations.

The task of intervening in the progressive problems and school failures of the at-risk student is unquestionably an incremental one. We must not expect dramatic results immediately. Any small but noticeable advances in retaining the at-risk student should be regarded as some success.

The composite profile of at-risk students discussed here can provide a foundation upon which an effective teacher training program that deals with understanding and working with at-risk students could be designed. At its heart must be strategies for

understanding at-risk youth and counseling techniques that show teachers how to effectively deal with at-risk students in group and one-on-one situations.

The project has also provided data that indicates a strong tie-in with parents, and their co-operation, is necessary if any at-risk program is to be effective. This is a difficult task, at best, but one that must be part of any at-risk program. Teachers reported that some parents told them that this project provided the first non-threatening communication venue that they had ever had with a school. This is both insightful and frightening. Schools, if they are to be effective in dealing with these types of student populations must be open and facilitative.

Those students who fall into the at-risk profile must be recognized, placed into programs, and monitored for change. Failure, in any one of these will exacerbate a problem that is now of national proportions.

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